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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 002598

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SUBJECT: SYRIA POINTS FINGER AT FOREIGN-BACKED ISLAMISTS
FOR JUNE 2 ATTACK

REF: DAM 1160

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (C) Summary: Early in the morning of June 2, SARG security forces engaged armed attackers in a 25-minute shoot-out in Damascus on the compound of the Syrian TV and Radio headquarters, according to Emboffs at the scene and regional media reports. Casualty reports have varied, with up to four attackers and seven members of security forces being killed, according to Embassy contacts and the media. The SARG has suggested through its official media that the 10 attackers were Islamic fundamentalists, armed by a neighboring country, perhaps to carry out U.S. and Israeli threats against Syria, a charge that has been picked up by reports in the offshore media. On the surface at least, the SARG seems to be trying to convey that it has contained the internal threat, while lashing out directly and indirectly at countries that have criticized the SARG publicly. End Summary.

12. (SBU) At 0600 Friday, June 2, Syrian security forces engaged 10 armed attackers in a 25-minute shoot-out in or around an abandoned building located between the Syrian TV and Radio Building and the state's Criminal Security branch near Omayyad Circle, an area that also houses the Ministry of Higher Education, the directorate of customs and other security establishments. Emboffs saw some 75-100 members of various Syrian security forces on the scene, including civilian police, military police, and intelligence services, with many of them rushing in and out of the entrance at Syrian TV and Radio. The overall response seemed somewhat haphazard and disorganized. Police were unable to establish any effective perimeter, with Polchief and A/RSO remaining in front of the TV and Radio Building for a quarter of an hour, watching the arrival of a flood of security personnel and ambulances. Near the end of the crisis, more senior officials arrived on the scene, including the Minister of Interior, Bassam Abdul-Majeed. Police closed Omayyad Circle for approximately two hours, although some traffic still managed to circulate.

13. (C) Casualty reports have varied, depending on the source. RSO contacts reported three attackers killed, two injured, one escaped and four arrested. The official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported "the killing of four armed terrorists and the martyrdom of a member of the fighting terror forces while the other terrorists were arrested, two of them wounded." An Embassy Alawite contact, whose cousin belonged to one of the units responding to the incident, said that six members of Syria's security forces were killed, many of them leaders of their units. The SARG generally

underreports casualties among its forces when it engages in fatal confrontations, according to the contact, Ghimar Deeb, who is a legal consultant for UNDP (protect) and a former prosecutor.

¶4. (U) The regional newspaper Al-Hayat reported that weapons and other items seized after the attack included American M16 rifles, hunting rifles, locally-made bombs, as well as CDs, cassette tapes, mobile phones and detonators, which official TV presented following the clash.

¶5. (C) The motive for the attack remains unclear. An initial SANA report quoted an Interior Ministry source who blamed armed Islamic terrorists, who followed Sufi teachings until Ramadan last October when they joined a "takfiri group." (Note: Takfiri Islamists insist on a strict interpretation of the Koran and of Sharia law that condemns as infidels those who do not accept this view.) Al-Hayat newspaper quoted a Syrian official who said he saw the attackers' corpses and that they were men in their 20s and 30s, dressed in military fatigues and colored headscarves that indicated they were "Syrian fundamentalists." Regional media reports about the incident also mentioned a string of attacks during the past year in Syria by the Jund-a-Sham Islamist group (reftel).

¶6. (C) On a separate note, the same Interior Ministry official quoted by SANA also suggested that Syria's political enemies may have been behind the attack, noting that "arms were supplied to the group by a neighboring country to stage sabotage acts aimed at vital targets and national interests." Some contacts, including Deeb, speculated that the SARG was trying to link the act to Amman, a riposte for Jordan's having accused Syria in April of complicity in planned

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Hamas-related attacks on Jordan. Other observers suggested that the SARG was trying to pin the incident on Beirut, as noted in a June 3 Associated Press report that noted past Syrian allegations of weapons coming into the country from Lebanon. A June 3 editorial in the official Tishreen newspaper suggested a U.S.-Israeli link, highlighting the seizure of American weapons and asserting, "Some time ago we heard successive fiery statements from known figures in neighboring countries threatening to transfer suicide and terrorist operations (from Iraq) to Syria. Was yesterday's incident in the heart of Damascus a translation of those America-Israeli threats that were uttered in Arabic?"

¶7. (C) Widespread speculation continues about the incident. A contact at the Egyptian Embassy called the incident "farcical," with little implication for the general security. Deeb assessed the incident as a real attack by a religiously motivated group, adding, however, that he was not worried about the immediate overall security in the capital. The security services are probably panicking because they have no details about the attackers' motivations, Deeb said, adding that their interrogation methods were bound to be "clumsy." The head of the Sufi-influenced Abu Noor Institute, Sheikh Saleh Kuftaro, took exception to the SARG's characterization of the attackers as "takfiris," citing a televised report on Syrian TV that showed one of the attackers wearing red undergarments. True fundamentalists would only wear long, white undergarments, Kuftaro told PolFSN. Analyst Samir al-Taki attributed the attack to a possible split among jihadist elements in Syria, some of them al-Qaida influenced, between those who want to focus on only the insurgency in Iraq and those who also insist on opening a front against the al-Asad regime in Syria. In his view, the SARG responded in a disorganized way to the June 2 incident, showing a fundamental weakness in the regime, regardless of its muscle-flexing internal crackdown and confrontational foreign policy. In al-Taki's view, if the attack had been part of a more sustained assault in the city, possibly with some civil unrest, the regime would not have been capable of responding effectively.

18. (C) Comment: This is the first serious incident of violence in the capital since the attack on the abandoned UN Building in Mezzeh neighborhood in April 2004. As in that incident, the June 2 shoot-out appears to have been a serious and sustained fire fight between SARG security forces and gunmen. As it did in April 2004, the SARG appears to be working hard to reassure the public quickly that it had the upper hand in the clashes. As reported in the past, Post believes that the SARG is taking action against some fundamentalist groups, many of them tied to efforts to support the insurgency in Iraq, although we suspect the main targets are those groups the SARG perceives as threatening its own well-being. The SARG's campaign is not, however, always highly publicized, except at carefully timed opportunities, such as now in the run-up to the ongoing National Salvation Front conference in London and the mid-June release of the latest UNIIIC investigation update.
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